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## Recognising Prior Experiential Learning: Challenges and Opportunities for Advancing Employability and Accrediting Lifelong Learning

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# Recognising Prior Experiential Learning: Challenges and Opportunities for Advancing Employability and Accrediting Lifelong Learning

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# Abstract

Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL) can **widen access** to higher education (HE) for individuals “who might otherwise be excluded by a lack of formal qualifications” (Garnett and Caveye, 2015, p. 29).

By valuing the **learning gained through experience**, RPEL acknowledges that higher level learning takes place in many settings and through this could create a more holistic education system that meets the needs of a wider audience (Marr and Bravenboer, 2017).

Through reflection, the RPEL process can make learning more meaningful and context specific, which could also enhance an individuals' motivation to engage. This paper will critically review the **key challenges and opportunities** for RPEL within Open and Distance Education and will focus specifically on those relevant to the development of a module that recognises and accredits prior experiential learning.

It will draw on research exploring **the learning that occurs for adults** when they volunteer with young people and will seek to consider how RPEL can be mapped to the employability framework to further enhance these outcomes for students.

This paper will critically review the key challenges and opportunities for RPEL within Open and Distance Education and will focus specifically on those relevant to the development of a module that recognises and accredits prior experiential learning.

# Recognition of Experiential Prior Learning

# Recognition of Experiential Prior Learning

"the identification, assessment and formal acknowledgment of learning and achievement that occurred at some time in the past prior to entry to a course of study but not in the context of formal education or training. This may include work experience, voluntary activity or other occupational learning and is not usually certificated" (The Open University, 2015 p.12).

# Volunteering as learning

# Volunteering as Learning

- Volunteering has the propensity, if organised appropriately, to **create opportunities** for **formal** (Mueller, 1975), **non-formal** (Alheit, 2009) and **informal learning** (Duguid et al, 2013);
- Through volunteering, **adults can learn** more about themselves and others (Clary, E. G. *et al.*, 1998);
- It can aid the development of **Human Capital**; encompassing emotional, cultural and intellectual capital (Gratton & Ghoshal, 2003);
- It also creates a space for **social learning** (Merriam et al, 2007) and **experiential learning** (Dewey, 1986).



# Volunteer Functions Inventory (Clary et al, 1998)

**Career:** 'The volunteer has the goal of gaining career-related experience through volunteering'.

**Enhancement:** 'One can grow and develop psychologically through volunteer activities'.

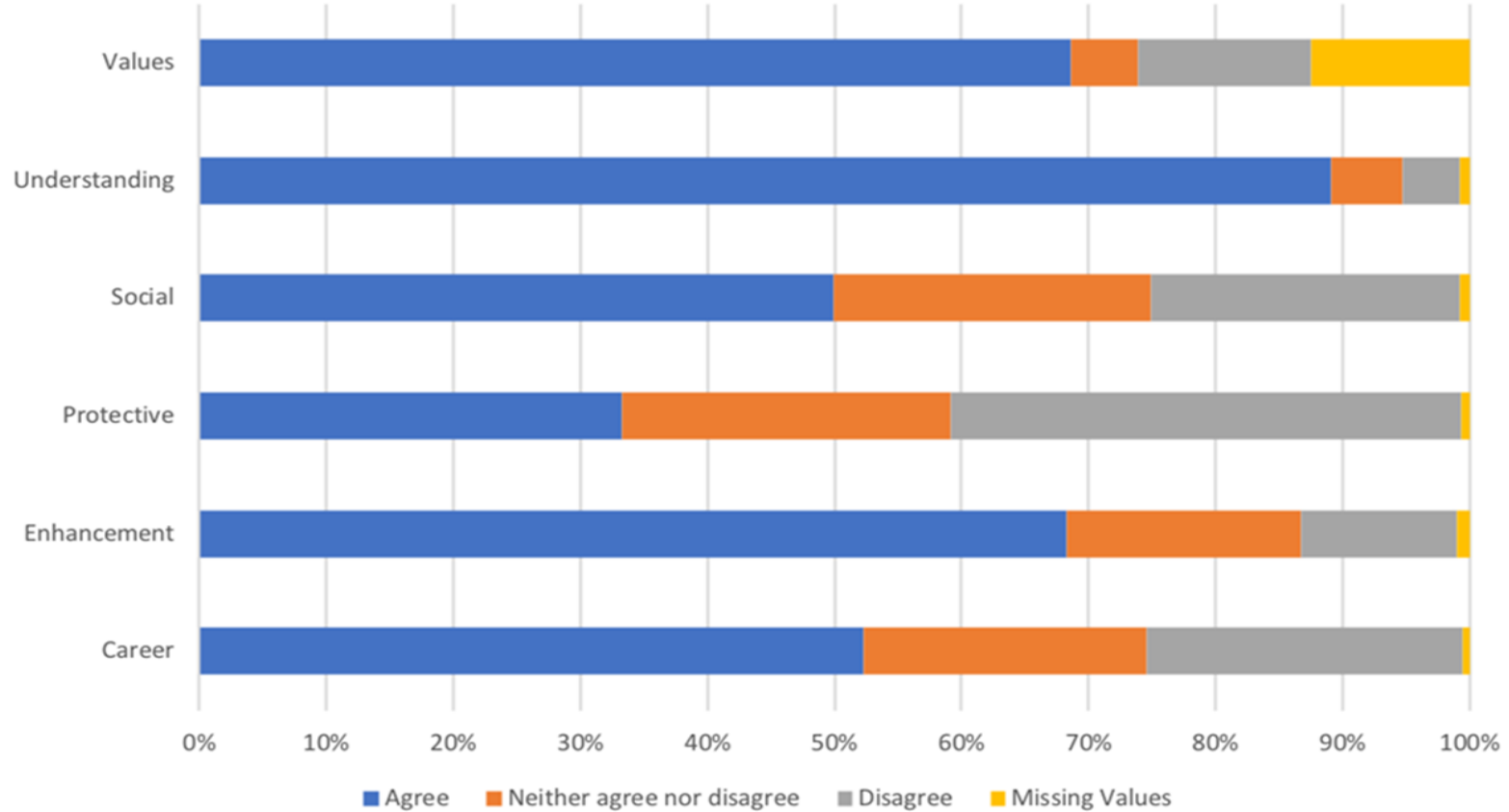
**Protective:** 'The individual uses volunteering to reduce negative feelings, such as guilt, or to address personal problems'.

**Social:** 'Volunteering allows an individual to strengthen his or her social relationships'.

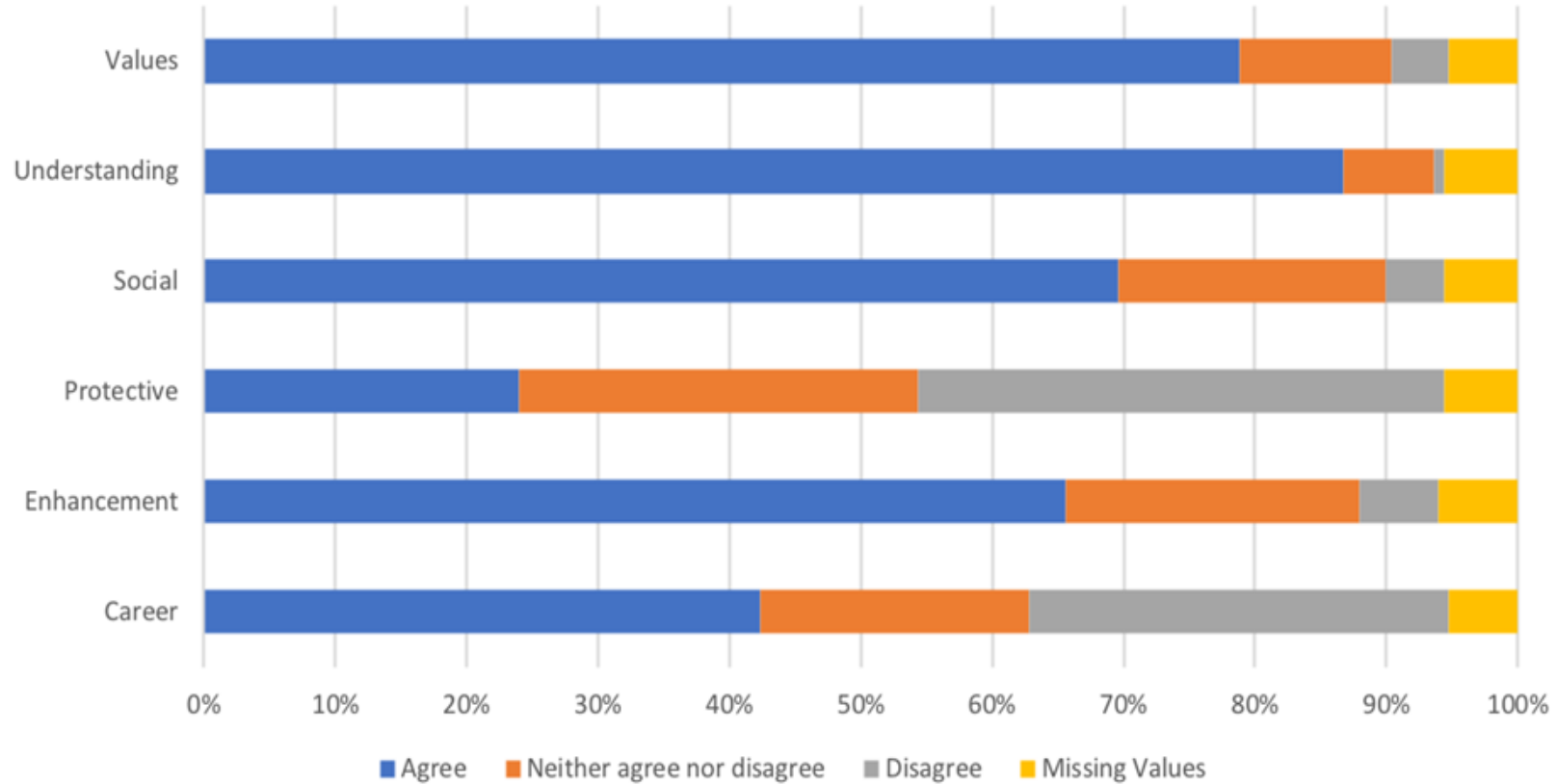
**Understanding:** 'The volunteer is seeking to learn more about the world or exercise skills that are often unused'.

**Values:** 'The individual volunteers in order to express or act on important values like humanitarianism'

## Volunteer Benefits



## Volunteering Outcomes



# Employability

# The OU Student Employability Policy Statement:

‘A set of **capabilities and achievements** that support students in developing their careers, raising their aspirations and enhancing their contribution to society.’ 2019

Employability is about so much more than ‘getting a job’. The notion of ‘enhancing their contribution to society’ relates to volunteering.

When working with adults, it is important to recognise the capitals that they bring with them. They may well also be in employment.

# The Open University's Employability Framework

Core skills and competencies		Personal attributes and behaviours		External awareness	
	Problem Solving		Initiative		Commercial and/or sector awareness
	Communication		Self-management and resilience		Global citizenship
	Collaboration		Self-awareness		
	Numeracy				
	Digital and Information Literacy				

The Open University is currently embedding our **Employability Framework** into our established modules. This inevitably can create some interesting challenges around module Learning Outcomes; QAA Benchmarks etc.

However, different approaches to employability '**by design**' might enable a '**strengths**' rather than '**deficit**' model.

# Models of RPEL Practice

Desktop research indicates that there are variations in practice.

## Model 1

- Map students learning against the module LOs

## Model 2

- Use the employability framework to drive and frame an 'open box' RPEL module to capture students learning.

# A 'guided' or 'open box' module



# What an 'Open Box' might look like

## **A social mission module:**

supporting students to reflect on their 'life learning'

Level 1 module x 60 credits (complement current offer):

'practice' undertaken within last 5 years = 300 hours over 5 years = 60 hours a year = 5 a month

## **Key features:**

- Recognised option module in Qualifications
- RPEL & Employability considered at the design stage
- Lifelong Learning 'at scale'
- Recognising students' capital and building confidence

# Benefits & Challenges

# Benefits

- Values Students Prior Experience
- Values the diverse capitals of students
- Situates students learning in their lived worlds
- Brings employability skills from the implicit to the explicit
- Values lifelong learning including students' contributions to society

# Challenges

- Scaffolding the students learning.
- Quality assuring the learning that comes from experience.
- Making sure the model used is appropriate for the learning.
- Currency of learning.
- Lack of a National Framework = Variations in practice.

## Conclusions

- Pedagogically, RPEL acknowledges that **learning** can be achieved in a variety of formal and informal settings and provides the learner with an opportunity to articulate such learning.
- Can **promote social justice** and widen access to and participation in HE.

# Thank you

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